

Nothing to Shout About

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Ay: Helloo! Where are you? Anybody home?

This year, бабье лето (what Americans call Indian summer) seems to have lasted a total of just one day, but all the same dacha life continues to have its pleasures. The damp and relative warmth are still creating paradise for the modern hunter-gatherer.

After stripping our yards of every possible гриб (mushroom) in the categories of safely съедобный (edible) and the more anxiety-producing условно-съедобный (edible with reservations), our little band of mushroom hunters moved to the fields and woods.

Everything was a delight for the senses: the scent of rich, loamy earth, the blindingly bright yellow leaves dancing down from the trees to the forest floor, and, best of all, the calls of our invisible friends floating on the air through the dense woods: Ay! Ay! (Where are you? Where are you?)

Sorry. Fall makes me lyrical.

Ay is called out in Russian whenever you want to know where someone is or to find out if anyone at all is there. You are most likely to hear it in the woods or the dark: Ау! Где вы? Откликнитесь, пожалуйста! (Hey! Where are you! Please respond!)

But you might also hear it when your significant other comes home: Входная дверь отворится, потом хлопнет, и я услышу: “Милый, ау!” (The front door will open, then slam shut, and I’ll hear: “Honey! Where are you?”) There is even a lovely verb, аукать (to call out): Я громко аукал, однако мне не отвечали (I called out loudly, but no one answered).

There are, of course, less esthetically pleasing ways to shout in Russian. Кричать can be used for any shout or cry: кричать от боли (to cry out in pain); кричать от восторга (to shout with delight).

Alas, with кричать, you need to pay attention to prepositions and case endings. Он кричал об этом means “He shouted about it” — that is, he spoke angrily about something. Маша кричала на него means “Masha yelled at him,” while the less common Маша кричала его means “Masha yelled for him.”

Кричать can also be used in the sense of testify: Какие-то мелочи в поведении, в манере вести себя и говорить просто кричали о том, что богат (Some small aspects of his behavior, his bearing and his way of speaking made it obvious that he was rich). Or the tip-off might have been his million-dollar Rolex.

Another verb, орать, is almost a synonym of кричать, only it generally implies screaming rather than shouting and is slightly more likely to be derogatory. Орать can refer to any noise — human, animal, natural or mechanical — that is very loud. If someone says: Птицы орут на рассвете (the birds start screaming at dawn), chances are he’s not enjoying their morning serenade. It can also refer to anything that screams visually: У них этот белый диван просто орёт! (Their white couch sticks out like a sore thumb!)

After an afternoon of shouting, screaming, and ay-ing in the woods, our band of mushroom hunters found each other. We showed off our laden baskets and tossed out a few dubious mushrooms.

Then I thought to ask: Если крикнешь в лесу “Ау” — что в ответ? (If someone shouts Helloo! in the woods, what should the reply be?) The answer — clearly from experience — was: Не кричи! Я же рядом! (Don’t shout! I’m right next to you!)

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of “The Russian Word’s Worth” (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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